US removes Syrian president, minister from terrorist list

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has removed Syrian President Ahmed al Sharaa from a list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).

In a coordinated move, the Treasury Department also delisted Syrian Interior Minister Anas Hasan Khattab from the same sanctions regime.

On Thursday, Pakistan joined 14 other members of the UN Security Council in supporting a US-backed resolution that lifted UN sanctions against both Syrian leaders.

The resolution formally removed the two officials from the Council's sanctions list against the militant Islamic State (IS) group and Al Qaeda, ending measures such as asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes imposed on listed individuals.

"Pakistan has always emphasised the need for sanctions relief to enable Syria's reconstruction and reintegration into the international community, while also facilitating sustained dialogue and engagement," said Pakistan's UN Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad.

"The Syrian people have suffered through more than a decade of conflict, chaos, and civil war. Today's vote is a welcome step by this Council, signalling the international community's support for helping the Syrian people transition into a new phase of their political journey," he added.

China was the only Council member to abstain. Explaining its position, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Fu Cong, said the United States "did not fully heed the views of all members and forced the Council to take action even when there were huge differences among members."

'Strong signal'

The US State Department, however, said the resolution's adoption "sent a strong political signal that further recognises Syria's transition to a new chapter".

Explaining the decision, the State Department noted that the delisting was made "in recognition of the progress demonstrated by the Syrian leadership after the departure of Bashar al Assad and more than 50 years of repression under the Assad regime".

It added that the new Syrian government, led by President Sharaa, was "working to locate missing Americans, fulfil its commitments on countering terrorism and narcotics, and eliminate any remnants of chemical weapons".

The statement also cited the government's efforts to "promote regional security and stability, and advance an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process".

The delisting marks a significant shift in US policy toward Syria. Both Sharaa and Khattab had been under sanctions for years for their alleged links to extremist groups and roles in the former Assad administration.

In May, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union lifted punitive measures covering around $15 billion in restricted assets and trade controls.

Regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, T rkiye, and Qatar, have also backed renewed engagement, offering to fund public salaries, rebuild energy infrastructure, and help Syria meet its obligations to international financial institutions.

RESIDENTS leave their flooded homes in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao due to heavy rain brought by Typhoon Fung-wong.—AFP

US judge rules Trump illegally ordered National Guard troops to Portland

WASHINGTON: U.S. President Donald Trump unlawfully ordered National Guard troops to Portland, Oregon, a federal judge ruled on Friday in a legal setback to the administration's use of the military in American cities.

The ruling by U.S. District Judge Karin Immergut is the first to permanently block Trump's use of military force to quell protests against immigration authorities. Trump is also attempting to do that in Democratic-led cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. It replaces her interim order that had prevented the Portland deployment.

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said in a statement on Friday that Trump had exercised his lawful authority to protect federal officers.

President Trump will not turn a blind eye to the lawlessness plaguing American cities, and we expect to be vindicated by a higher court, Jackson said.

The Oregon Attorney General's Office did not immediately respond to an email seeking comment.

Immergut, a Trump appointee, stated that the administration had no lawful basis to claim that a rebellion was occurring in Portland or that the government was unable to enforce federal law due to the protests.

"The occasional interference to federal officers has been minimal, and there is no evidence that these small-scale protests have significantly impeded the execution of any immigration laws," she said in her 106-page opinion and order.

Trump's attempts to use military force to tamp down unrest are a sharp break with long-standing but rarely tested norms against deploying troops on U.S. soil.

The Trump administration is likely to appeal Friday's ruling, and the case could ultimately reach the Supreme Court.

The City of Portland and the Oregon Attorney General's Office sued in September, alleging the Trump administration was exaggerating occasional violence to justify sending in troops under a law permitting presidents to do so in cases of rebellion.

Dueling narratives emerged during a three-day bench trial.

Justice Department lawyers described a violent siege overwhelming federal agents, echoing Trump's description of the city as "war-ravaged." Lawyers for Oregon and Portland said violence has been rare, isolated, and contained by local police.

Immergut concluded in her order that the violence was small-scale, isolated, disorganized, and had largely subsided by the time Trump ordered in the National Guard in late September.

Democrats have said Trump is abusing military powers meant for genuine emergencies such as an invasion or an armed rebellion.

Immergut blocked Trump from deploying troops to Portland with an interim order on October 5.

The Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is considering the Trump administration's appeal of that decision.

Three judges, including Immergut, have issued preliminary rulings that Trump's National Guard deployments are not allowed under the emergency legal authority cited by his administration.—Reuters

Philippines halts search for typhoon dead as huge new storm approaches

MANILA: Rescue work was suspended and preemptive evacuations began Saturday as Typhoon Fung-wong bore down on the Philippines, days after another storm killed at least 204 people.

Fung-wong, expected to be a "super typhoon" before making landfall, bears a huge footprint, with a radius that could cover "almost the entire country," a government meteorologist said.

"Apart from the strong winds, we can also expect heavy rains ... 200 millimetres (eight inches) or higher rainfall, which can cause widespread flooding, not just in low-lying areas," meteorologist Benison Estareja said on Saturday.

"It's also possible that our major river basins will overflow." As of 11 am (0300 GMT), the typhoon was moving westward toward the Philippines' main island of Luzon, with wind speeds of 140 kilometres per hour and gusts of 170 kph.

In coastal Aurora province, where Fung-wong is expected to make landfall by late Sunday or early Monday morning, rescuers were going door to door encouraging residents to head for higher ground.

"We are preemptively evacuating people in areas that may be high-risk for flooding," provincial rescuer Elson Egargue said.

Farther south, on Catanduanes, a small island the state weather service said could take a "direct hit", residents were tying down their houses and putting weights on their roofs.

"They decided to do our tradition of strapping down the roofs with big ropes and anchoring them on the ground, so they won't be blown away by the wind," provincial rescue official Roberto Monterola said.

Earlier this week, Typhoon Kalmaegi sent floodwaters rushing through the towns and cities of Cebu province, sweeping away cars, riverside shanties and massive shipping containers.—AFP

5 die, over 400 hurt as twister devastates town in Brazil

BRASLIA: A tornado killed at least five people and injured more than 400 as it destroyed most of a town in southern Brazil, authorities said on Saturday.

The twister on Friday overturned cars and damaged homes in Rio Bonito do Iguacu, in Parana state, the local weather service reported.

It killed five people and injured 432, the Parana state government said.

Two others are missing, but this number could rise, it said.

Winds in Rio Bonito do Iguacu, population 14,000, reached between 180 and 250 kilometers per hour (110 and 155 miles per hour), Parana's environmental technology and monitoring agency said.

Civil defence officials said 80 percent of the town is now destroyed.

Images on social media show homes razed by the violent weather.

"It is a war scene," Fernando Schunig, head of the Parana Civil Defense agency, told the news outlet G1.

He said the likelihood of more fatalities is high because the twister hit the centre of the town.—AFP

Agreement reached to end mercury tooth fillings by 2034

GENEVA: Countries agreed on Friday to phase out the use of mercury-based dental amalgams in tooth fillings by 2034, in a move that will change dentistry around the world.

At a conference in Geneva, signatories to a treaty aimed at protecting human health and the environment from mercury pollution called time on mercury amalgams.

Nations agreed "to end the use of dental amalgam by 2034, marking a historic milestone in reducing mercury pollution", the conference announced in its closing statement.

The World Health Organisation considers mercury one of the top 10 chemicals of major public health concern, calling it "toxic to human health".

Some countries have already banned its use in dental amalgam, a common filling material used for more than 175 years.

The Minamata Convention on Mercury is an international treaty to protect human health and the environment from the adverse effects of mercury and mercury compounds.

More than 150 countries are party to the convention, which was adopted in 2013 and came into force in 2017. Parties at this week's conference adopted amendments "establishing a global phase-out of dental amalgam by 2034", the closing statement said.

"This science-based, time-bound agreement marks a decisive step toward the total elimination of mercury use in dentistry and a safer future for all communities."

African initiative

The treaty already stipulates that signatories must take measures to phase out the use of mercury-based dental amalgams.

However, a bloc of African countries wanted a deadline, with a ban on their production, import, and export, starting in 2030. As the conference opened on Monday, US Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

asked why mercury was deemed "dangerous in batteries, in over-the-counter medications and make-up", but acceptable in dental fillings.

"It's inexcusable that governments around the world still allow mercury-based compounds in healthcare — and safe alternatives exist," he said in a video message.

A few countries opposed the idea of a phase-out by 2030, including Iran and India, and Britain, which said it was too soon.

But countries came together and agreed on a phase-out by 2034.

"We have just opened the door to another chapter of the Mercury history book," said the convention's executive secretary, Monika Stankiewicz.

"Mercury pollution is a scourge." However, "by understanding one another and bridging our differences, we can make a difference in the lives of people everywhere".

The European Union's representative called it "an important milestone in making mercury history: a step that will bring lasting benefits for human health and the environment globally". Mexico, speaking for the Latin American and Caribbean countries, called it an "ambitious but realistic step towards a future free from mercury".

Skin-lightening cosmetics

Overall, the conference adopted 21 decisions aimed at better protecting human health and the environment from mercury pollution.

Countries also agreed to step up efforts to eliminate skin-lightening cosmetics containing mercury, through curbing illegal trade and strengthening enforcement.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

JAKARTA: Caged birds hang from poles at a site usually used for bird singing contests.—AFP

VATICAN CITY: Pope Leo XIV and South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa pose during a private audience.—AFP

AMRITSAR: A priest carries the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book, during a religious procession at the Golden Temple to mark the 350th death anniversary of Guru Tegh Bahadur.—AFP

RESCUERS and firefighters work at the site of the perfume warehouse in Turkiye's Dilovasi district.—FP

Fire at perfume warehouse kills six in Turkiye

ANKARA: A blaze erupted early on Saturday at a perfume warehouse in an industrial town in northwestern Turkiye housing numerous depots and factories, killing six people and injuring five, officials said.

The fire in Dilovasi was brought under control by firefighters, rescue teams, and municipal staff, Ilhami Aktas, the governor of Kocaeli province, told public broadcaster *TRT* Haber.

"Six of our citizens have unfortunately lost their lives," Aktas said.

"One of the injured is in a critical condition due to burns," he said, adding that the fire broke out at 9am (0600 GMT).

"Four others are in relatively stable condition and receiving treatment," he added.

Aktas said the fire "was rapidly controlled and put out" and added that an investigation had been launched to "determine the cause of the blaze".

Media reports earlier said two people had been injured.

Two storeys of the building used as a depot were destroyed in the fire, images aired by the Turkish *NTV* channel showed. The origins of the fire were still unclear.

"I heard an explosion... I looked from my balcony and saw that the clothes of a colleague had caught fire. I took a hose and I put the flames out. I then saw flames engulf the factories. There were cries" from the building, a witness told the private *NTV* channel.

Located around 70 kilometres from Istanbul, Dilovasi is an industrial town hosting numerous depots and factories.—AFP

THE HAGUE: Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, looks on as she attends the unveiling of a plaque for her late husband, set up across from the Russian embassy in the Netherlands.—AFP

BASRA: Governor Asaad al Eidani (centre-right) attends a rally for the Tasmim Alliance ahead of Iraq's parliamentary elections, scheduled to be held on Nov 11.—AFP